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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the history of academic degrees and rank in the Czech Republic since World War II. Before the communist period, degrees and rank in Czechoslovakia were influenced by the German and Austrian systems, with the PhDr. degree in the humanities and philosophy and the RNDr. (rerum naturalium doctor) degree in the sciences and mathematices awarded upon completion and defense of a dissertation. Habilitation, the achievement of a permanent post at the university, was obtained by completion of a "great dissertation," and was similar to the tenure process in American universities. After 1950 the Soviet system of higher education was introduced, with the creation of independent academies and the Candidate of Science (CSc.) and Doctor of Science (DrSc.) degrees. After 1964 the Soviet-style system was modified somewhat, becoming a hybrid of traditional Czechoslovak and Soviet systems. The end of communism and the 1990 law on higher education led to a return to the former Czechoslovak system of PhDr. and RNDr. degrees and habilitation, with the process now more similar to the attainment of the American PhD. degree. (MDM)

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RANK AND DEGREE IN CZECH UNIVERSITIES[1]

by
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RANK AND DEGREE IN CZECH UNIVERSITIES

by
James Mauch[1]

The following discussion is designed to interpret the meaning and history of academic rank and title in the Czech Republic since WWII. The terminology is confusing to Americans because the processes of achieving rank or degrees are quite different from those in the USA even though the terminology may be similar. The Czech system has had in modern times three foreign influences: German-Austrian, Soviet, and the US. This makes the Czech system an interesting case for comparing systems, for understanding the Soviet system introduced throughout eastern Europe and central Asia, and for explaining terms that may be unknown in much of the West.. For example, in this discussion the word *faculty* is used in the European sense of a university school; thus a faculty of pedagogy is roughly equivalent to a school of education. The word teacher is used to mean a teaching faculty member in secondary or higher education. The terms *scientific degrees* and *academies of science* should be understood as *research degrees* and *academies of research*, e.g. the Academy of Biological Sciences would be the National Academy for Biological Research. This paper describes the normal procedures; there were always exceptional cases.

Degrees and rank before 1950

Before communism, Czechoslovakia had a post-graduate rank and degree system in the tradition of western Europe, especially Germany and Austria. There was one academic doctorate and process, although it could go by various names, e.g. PhDr. in humanities and Philosophy, and RNDr. (rerum naturalium doctor) in the sciences and Math. It was available, not only to university students, but to any educated person who, after a university degree, could bring his dissertation to the dean of the relevant faculty and petition for the degree of doctor. This would be a major piece, perhaps several hundred pages, and be based on research or library work in the narrow specialty of the individual. In fact, many teachers at the *gymnasium* (academic high school) did get their doctorates in this way. Also, exceptionally good fourth or fifth year university students, would be encouraged by their professor to seek a doctorate in the same way, and indeed the specific topic might even be discussed. There was, however, no formal advisor in this procedure. In any case, if the dissertation was accepted by the faculty as adequate, the candidate would be given several days of examination in the specialty as well as other subjects, e.g. philosophy, history, language. If that went well, a public discussion would be scheduled, and two or three professors would critique the work in writing. Anyone could attend and ask questions. The doctorate would then be awarded by a vote of the faculty, or by the scientific board of the faculty. Many achieved the doctor title without any intention of university employment.

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Habilitation. While the PhDr. was a title, the habilitation was conceptually a rank, a rite of passage to a permanent post at the university. It followed the PhDr. and was harder to achieve. The dissertation was sometimes referred to as the *great dissertation*, for it required 300-500 pages, again not directed by an advisor (in German, *doctor-father*). This was a much more difficult step, and most important to becoming a regular university teacher. There were few regulations or restrictions, but the great dissertation was evaluated by the faculty, and if satisfactory, the candidate was nominated for the position of *docent* at the university. Thus habilitation and docent were normally awarded together. After several years and excellent work, selected docents were nominated to be professor. Neither the doctorate not the habilitation were equivalent in form or process to the US PhD, although there were similarities. The habilitation process was similar to the tenure process in the US, and the position of docent could be compared to an Associate Professor with tenure.

After 1950

It took a few years, but by 1950 the communists were able to change higher education to emulate the Soviet system. First there was the suppression of the old academies of science, prestigious but powerless cultural organizations of leading intellectuals and academics. Then in 1952, the party re-created, under its direct control, a new, powerful, and well-endowed Soviet-style system of academies of science. These academies were responsible for research and development in a number of fields, particularly in the hard sciences and technology, areas of most interest to the communists. (Daniel 1991). With the advent of the Sovietization of higher education and the re-constituting of the academies, the old degree structure was replaced by a new structure to award advanced degrees.

After 1950, the academies were empowered to award the Soviet titles *Candidate of Science (CSc.)* and *Doctor of Science (DrSc.)*. This authority was put into their hands for several reasons. First, the academies wanted to train their own scientists and researchers. Since the academies were not teaching institutions their large staffs of scientists could not earn advanced degrees at the academies unless these new degrees were put under their authority. Second, important scientific work and higher research was to be done at the academies, and the universities were increasingly relegated to teaching, with less of a role in research or graduate work, so awarding of advanced degrees was no longer seen as the exclusive, or even appropriate role, of universities. In many scientific fields the academies were seen as the centers of the highest science and research, thus clearly the most competent to award the scientific degrees[2].

In any case there was now a duplicate system, with universities and academies authorized to award the CSc. and DrSc., and these two were essentially the only graduate degrees offered. Between 1950 and 1964 there was no mention in the higher education law of any other graduate degree. Often there was a duplication of departments, e.g. a department of German Language at Charles University, and one in the Institute of Science for World Literature, under the jurisdiction of the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences. One could have earned the CSc. or DrSc. in German language and literature in either institution. If there were differences, they were

that the Academies tended to be better endowed with resources, had no teaching responsibilities, tended to focus on research, and employed researchers under comparatively favorable conditions.

The CSc. was the result of five years of study and scientific work after university, carried out in one of the academies of science, or at the university. At the end of study three major written and oral exams were required: one in Marxism, the second in two foreign languages (Russian had to be one), and the third exam in the major subject of specialization. In the fifth or sixth year the "great" dissertation was written, a major research work of several hundred pages in the specialty. At the end came the great public examination of this work. It was open to everyone, and it would often draw specialists from many parts of the country to examine the candidate. This discussion could last for hours.

The second degree in the new academic rank process was the doctorate (DrSc.). It was based on a dissertation, although in a few exceptional circumstances it was awarded without a dissertation, almost as an award for high achievement. This rank was difficult to achieve, and few achieved it. It was usually reserved for older academics who were distinguished scientists and intellectuals. The title of professor was occasionally awarded at this point. By the mid 1950's this system replaced the old system, and it was the only route to earning advanced scientific degrees. Although the title of PhDr. from the old system continued to be recognized, it was no longer offered.

The habilitation process still came after the CSc., leading to the teaching title of docent, but it now rested on examinations and a record of scholarship rather than a dissertation. The great dissertation was now a part of the CSc. work.

<u>After 1964</u>

In 1964, a new law for higher education modified the degree system, particularly the role of the CSc. This title was not understood or accepted in the West, nor was it consistent with Czech history. Thus the government changed the degree structure by combining the pre-1950 system and the Soviet system.

After 1964 the two degrees described above were retained, followed by the *habilitation*, which was modified. It now no longer was based on examinations, but on a major dissertation (often 500 pages) on a subject other than the specialized document written for the CSc. Again, it was followed by the open public discussion and critique. In some cases the person could be nominated for the habilitation without presenting a dissertation.

The PhDr. was brought back, modified, from pre-1950. If the major research paper written at the culmination of a university education was of high enough calibre, there was no need for another dissertation. If the work was very good, but not sufficient, the candidate would write another long work, perhaps one hundred pages, in the field of specialization. If accepted by the faculty, the candidate would have several days of examination in the specialty, perhaps general philosophy for a PhDr., and another exam in an area elected by the candidate. If all

exams were passed, the faculty awarded the doctorate degree. Toward the end of the 1980's an exception was permitted in a few cases in that university students with outstanding records--perhaps the top 1%--would receive the doctorate without any additional exams. In a sense the PhDr. was debased in this period, and did not enjoy prestige among Czech scientists, who thought of their CSc. degree as the true research PhD. Their term for this PhDr. was the little doctorate. It was normally awarded by the university.

In many countries the doctorate is viewed as the culminating degree, the highest and most selective given by the university. The attitude of Czech academics is often quite different, i.e. the CSc. earned in the communist era was viewed as a much more important and scientific (research) degree, and they refer to it as the great doctorate. The review above will help explain these differences, and also provide some background to understand the struggle now going on in Czech universities to re-introduce the PhDr. at the universities and gradually remove from the academies the awarding of degrees.

During the communist period, those who wished to earn advanced degrees normally had to pass the scrutiny of the regional committees of the Party, and there was always the possibility that access to the degree, as was the case with admission to the university, would be influenced by political considerations. Names of candidates for advanced degrees, as well as proposed examinations, had to be submitted to the committee. After 1968, the submission of dissertations was required as well. The Faculty Scientific Board was not able to review or discuss it until approved by the Party's regional committee. In the case of the University of South Bohemia, and this may have happened elsewhere as well, it was discovered after 1989 that there was one person (the role and identity of this person was successfully hidden until the fall of communism) at Party headquarters who supervised academics in the region. When names of candidates, their proposed exams, and dissertations topics were submitted, they came to his office for review and approval.

After 1989

The law on higher education of 1990 brought a return to the former Czech system, the PhDr. and habilitation. Today, however, the degree is similar to the US research PhD and takes about 5 years beyond the university (Mag. or Ing.) degree. The student must pass a number of examinations, including the *rigorosa* (comprehensive) established by the Faculty. In exceptional circumstances it is done in less time. There is an advisor, faculty committees and a dissertation of about 100-200 pages. This is at present the only earned doctorate, although those who started their CSC. or DrSc. work before 1989 could continue to completion, or to change, by advisor petition, to PhDr. study. Most who were in their first year of doctorate work changed to the PhDr.

The habilitation is more difficult to achieve now than before 1989. It involves the writing of a major dissertation (300-500 pages), a review by a board of three persons nominated by the candidate and chosen by the Scientific Board of the Faculty, and a final public defense open to experts and the public. The selected board of expert colleagues from the candidate's, as well as

other universities, examines the candidate. Also, the candidate gives a lecture in front of the board, as well as students, public, and other colleagues. The topic of the lecture is chosen in part by the board and in part by the candidate.

The rank of professor is achieved by a similar process, although no more writing of dissertations is necessary. The board of examiners, similar to that described above, reviews the scientific work of the candidate, record of achievements, and requires a public lecture which illustrates a mastery of the field and its context in Czech and world science. The members of the review board are proposed by the candidate to the Scientific Board of the Faculty, which may accept or change the list of proposed members. The university nominates but the President of the Republic names a Professor. There are few professors, perhaps 15% of the teaching staff nationally.

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2. Daniel (1992) offers some figures. In 1980 the Czechoslovak Academy operated 71 scientific research centers with 10,572 employees. In the same year the Slovak Academy of Sciences had 57 scientific research centers with 4622 employees, a total of 128 centers, with 15,194 employees in the whole country.

In 1989, the Czechoslovak Academy employed 12,896 persons of whom 6,054 were university trained. The Slovak Academy that year employed 6,810, of whom 3447 were university trained. The number of persons employed at technical-research institutes at universities in Czechoslovakia in 1989 was 5402, of whom 3653 were university trained.

During the communist era, the academies had responsibility for reviews of scientific papers, and proposed journal articles were sent to the appropriate academy board for review. Scientists at the academies were substantially more successful in publishing their results, due both to the process and to their access to richer resources for scientific research and publications. Both organizations had their own publishing houses and were responsible for the scientific training of young researchers. While universities had their representatives in the presidiums of each of the academies and received about one-fifth of the funds assigned by the government for fundamental research, they produced far fewer research publications than did the academies.

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